



GOING to IRAN

How to travel to Iran

By plane

All international flights to Tehran land at the new Imam Khomeini International Airport [2] based 37 km southwest of Tehran. Pilgrimage flights to Saudi Arabia still fly from Mehrabad airport. There are 70 smaller regional airports, for example those in Shiraz, Mashhad, and Isfahan, and these have daily flights to many international destinations.

Dubai has scheduled flights to many Iranian cities, including Tehran, Shiraz, Isfahan, Kerman, Lar, Mashhad, Tabriz, Kish Island, Bandar Abbas, Bushher, Zahedan, Kermanshah, Chah Bahar and is therefore worth considering travelling to Iran from. Flights are operated by Iran Air, Emirates (for Tehran), Iran Aseman Airlines, Mahan Air and other Iranian companies. Fares are relatively cheap on Iranian carriers, ranging from US\$100-250 for a return trip depending on your destination and time of booking.

IranAir and MahanAir connect Tehran with some of the major European cities as well as destinations in Asia and Middle East. European companies landing in Tehran include BMI, Lufthansa, KLM, Alitalia, Turkish Airlines, Austrian Airlines, Aeroflot and Middle-Eastern airlines: Saudi Arabian Airlines, Emirates, and Etihad. AirAsia has flights to/from Kuala Lumpur and Bangkok. Also, Thai Airways serves a direct route to/from Bangkok starting from October 1, 2016 onwards. So finding a flight to Iran should not be hard.

Connections are also easily available via Manama, Bahrain using Gulf Air (but has stopped recently). Additionally, Qatar airlines offers several flights to Iran and provides non-stop service to Doha from to many US cities.

Low-cost carriers (LCC) also operate flights to Tehran or other cities in Iran.

Pegasus Airlines has flights to Tehran via Istanbul.

Atlasglobal has flights to Tehran via Istanbul.

Germania Airline has flights to Tehran via Berlin, Dusseldorf and Hamburg and to Mashhad via Hamburg.

Air Arabia has flights to Tehran and Shiraz via Sharjah.

Jazeera Airways has flights to Mashhad via Kuwait.

Air Asia has flights to Tehran via Kuala Lumpur and Bangkok, Thailand.

Shaheen Air has flights from Mashhad to Lahore in Pakistan.

Note that if not staying in Tehran and planning to get to any city other than Tehran upon your arrival, you would have to change airports, from Imam Khomeini to Mehrabad, 40km away, to get to your domestic flight. Allow at least 3-4h between the flights. If going to Mashhad, you may be able to avoid the plane change in Iran using Turkish Airlines, Gulf Air, Kuwait Airways, Jazeera Airways, or Qatar Airways. If going to Shiraz, several flights from Persian Gulf States are available. For Tabriz, you can try travelling via Istanbul on Turkish Airlines or via Baku on IranAir.

In spite of economic sanctions the majority of Iranian based airlines did not have high level of incidents during recent years. However sanctions resulted in inability to purchase new planes and the fleet of all airlines are old. Among Iranian based airlines Iran Air, Mahan Air and Aseman Airlines have been completely safe with no serious incidents during recent years. Due to safety issues flying with other Iranian based airlines is not recommended. The service and flying skill of Iranian pilots are fairly well known.

There are no direct flights at present from Canada or the USA, but you could travel via either Europe or Persian Gulf States. Non-stop flights from Dubai via JFK, IAD, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Houston or Toronto are good bets. Visitors from Australia or New Zealand can consider travelling via Dubai or Abu Dhabi, or can use a combination of Iran Air and Malaysian or Thai Airlines to get from any major city in Australia to Tehran, via Kuala Lumpur or Bangkok. Air Asia and Thai Airways also has good deals from Australia and New Zealand to Tehran with a stop in Kuala Lumpur or Bangkok.

There are weekly flights from Sulamaniya in Iraqi Kurdistan to Sanandaj and from Arbil to Urmia.

From Damascus in Syria there are charter flights to Tabriz, Tehran, Yazd, Isfahan and Mashhad. There are agencies in Seyyedeh-Zeinab district (a popular place with Iranian pilgrimages) that can sell you empty seats of these charter flights for less than 100\$.

Iran is connected to Pakistan via the following air links:

Iran Air connects Tehran to Karachi

Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) connects Zahedan to Quetta

Shaheen Air a low cost Pakistani Airline connects Mashhad to Lahore.

By train

Turkey

There are no trains to Turkey. Until 2015 the Trans-Asia Express ran once a week between Tehran and Ankara, whilst another train ran once a week between Van and Tabriz. These services are suspended indefinitely.

Syria

This train service is suspended indefinitely.

Afghanistan

The Mashad-Herat railway which is under construction right now is completed until the city of Khaf near Afghanistan border. The cheap daily service from Tehran to Khaf near Afghanistan border is about US\$5.

Iraq

The Khorramshar-Basra railway will be completed in a few months which will connect Iranian railways to Iraq. There will be specially train routes for Iranians going to pilgrim in Najaf and Karbala. There is another project that will be completed later going through Kermanshah to Khanaqin in Iraq.

Pakistan

The Quetta-Zahedan line connects Pakistan and Iran by rail. A train leaves every 1st and 15th of each month from Quetta and the journey takes 11 hr and costs about €8. In opposite direction the train leaves every 3rd and 17th of each month from Zahedan.

In June 2009 a Bam-Zahedan freight line was completed, which connected Zahedan to rest of Iranian railway network. However there is no passenger train between Bam and Zahedan at present, so you have to take a bus or taxi.

Azerbaijan

The Nakhchivan-Tabriz service connects Nakhchivan with Tabriz and crosses from the Jolfa border. The route used to be a part of Tehran-Moscow railway line which is closed right now due to Azerbaijan-Armenia conflicts.

There is a railway from Baku to the border city of Astara. From there you can walk through the border to Iran. The railway is going to be joined to Tehran via Rasht and Zanzan.

Turkmenistan

There is a daily service between Mashad and Sarakhs border every day. The train does not go further because of the gauge changes. At the other side of the border there is train to Merv and Ashgabat.

Another railway from Gorgan is currently built up to the Inche Borun border which will continue to Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan.

By car

Many people drive a car to Iran via Turkey.

This requires a Carnet De Passage unless you wish to pay import tax. A Carnet can be acquired from your local drivers association (such as the RAC in the UK). An international driver's license is highly recommended with translation into Persian very beneficial.

Some borders (Turkey notably) offer entry with an alternative "transit carnet", available for 150-euro. This lasts 3 days. A 60-euro fine is levied at the exit border if you overstay these 3 days.

By bus

Armenia

From Armenia there are daily, modern buses from Yerevan to Tabriz and even further to Teheran. Alternatively you can take a marshrutka from the Kayakan bus terminal in Yerevan to Meghri or all the way to Agarak, which is the border town to Iran. In both directions the Marshrutka leaves quite early in the morning. Kapan and Karajan are more frequently served by marschrutkas but it is a long and mountainous (and therefore expensive) stretch to the border from there. From Meghri it is around 8 km to the border and hitching or a taxi is the only option. On the Iranian side the closest public transport can be found around 50km to the west in Jolfa, so a taxi for IRR80,000 (about USD3) is again the only commercial choice. Expect to be asked a lot for all taxi rides, so hard bargaining is essential. Making clear, or at least pretending that you have other choices may assist you to get fairer prices. Locals confirmed, that the taxi ride to Jolfa is 80000 Rial. Sometimes it's easier to bargain if the taxi drivers know that you know the price.

The border is not busy at all, so when hitching you have to mainly stick with the truck drivers and Russian or Persian helps a lot here. Consider for yourself whether this is a safe option.

Turkey

You can find Seir-o-Safar agencies in Istanbul, Antalya and Ankara to buy cheap bus tickets for Tehran. A one-way ticket between Istanbul or Ankara and Tehran costs USD35.00.

Dogubeyazit/Bazergan This Turkey/Iran border crossing is easily (and fast) done by public transport. Take a bus to Dogubeyazit and a frequent minibus (c. TRY5, 15min) to the border. Cross the border stretch on foot, take the customs taxi (give the driver some IRR1,000 baksheesh) to the next village and take a taxi (USD3-4) to the bus terminal in Bazergan. There could also be buses to Bazergan, but the taxi drivers approaching you at the border are not the right people to ask for that. From there you can easily get buses to major destinations in Iran. Check the security situation in the region, due to the unsolved PKK conflict. Make sure you get a clear idea about exchange rates if you want to change Turkish lira or Iranian rials as the official bank at the border does not exchange these currencies and you have to deal with the plentiful black market.

There are also buses from Van to Urmia crossing from Esendere-Sero border. The buses cost €13 and it takes more than 6h to finish the 300km path. That's because of poor roads in the Turkish side and also too many check stops at the Turkish side (more than 5) because of security reasons concerning the P.K.K.

You can also take mini buses to the town Yüksekova near the border and ask for taxis to bring you to the border. Cross the border check point on your own since the taxis won't cross into Iran.

Pakistan

You can also (depending on the political situation) enter from Pakistan via the border crossing between Taftan (on the Pakistani side) and Zahedan (on the Iranian side) as long as you have a valid visa for Iran. You can NOT get a visa at the border. Overnight buses leave from Quetta arriving in Taftan in the early morning, from there you can either hire a taxi to the border or walk a couple of kilometres. Once across the border (which can take some time on the Iranian side, you need to organise transport to Zahedan (the local town) where buses depart for destinations in Eastern Iran

such as Bam, Kerman and Yazd. See the Istanbul to New Delhi over land 3.9 Iran-Pakistan border, for more details on the crossing.

This option is sometimes dangerous as Pakistani Balochistan has issues of sectarian violence linked with religious militants against the Shia minority. The earlier nationalist insurgency demanding independence for Balochistan has almost died down and situation is lot better though a caution must still be exercised. Earlier at least at three to four occasions in last five years buses coming to and from the Iranian border have been stopped on the outskirts of Quetta and the Shias have been shot dead. On one occasion, Pakistani travelers returning from Iran have also been attacked in Turbat.

The train from Zahedan to Quetta is a better option though lacks sophistication and luxuries. There is also a flight from Zahedan to Quetta via PIA.

Iraq

There are daily buses from Arbil to Urmia, also there are daily buses from Sanandaj and Kermanshah to Sulaymaniyah. From Tehran, there are also buses to Sulaymaniyah and Arbil.

Afghanistan

There are daily buses between Herat and Mashad. The buses go through Dogharoun Border. The road has been built by Iran and is reported safe.

Turkmenistan

A bus service also runs between Ashgabat and Mashhad.

By boat

There are some scheduled services from Baku to Bandar Anzali on the Caspian Sea and from cities on the Persian Gulf to cities on the Iranian coast. They are usually of low quality.

Starting in late 2007 and 2008; high quality semi-luxurious ferry service started between Kish Island and Abu Dhabi and Dubai. This service is of nominal fee (@ US\$50) and the journey across one of the busiest stretches of water is sure to entertain. It is not currently known what the Customs and Entry Visa process is like using this service however as the boats do not enter via the airport. While the entry/exit process at the airport is fairly well established, it is unknown if the process is as well managed when entering via the docks. It is likely to be more chaotic and it is not known whether visas are issued on the spot as is the case at the airport.

There are also ferries from Bandar Abbas to Dubai and Sharjah in UAE, and also ferries from Bushehr to Qatar, Kuwait and Bahrain. These are operated by Valfajr Shipping Company [3]. Rates depend on your exact journey, but as of January 2014, Bandar Abbas-Sharjah (UAE) was sold for IRR1,600,000 (about €40). Boats run three times a week (Saturday, Monday & Wednesday), departing Bandar Abbas around 21:00. Tickets can be bought from one of the agencies listed on the website. Expect to be the only non-Iranian on board. Plan loosely around the boat trip, as schedules are not strictly enforced.

Money and daily life

There is little point in risking the use of black market moneychangers who loiter outside of major banks and only offer marginally better rates than the banks. Banks in most cities will change money for you, but the process can be a drawn out affair requiring signatures from countless officials and a fair deal of running around.

A better compromise are the private exchange offices (*sarāfi*) scattered around most large cities and major tourist centres. Their rates are much better than those of the banks, they are far quicker and, unlike their black market colleagues, they can be traced later on if something goes wrong.

The most widely-accepted currencies are US dollar (\$) and euros (€). Other currencies are harder if not impossible to change. US\$100 and large euro unfolded notes tend to attract the highest prices, and you may be quoted lower rates for any old or ripped notes (sometimes old notes are outrightly turned down).

Bargain ruthlessly when buying handcrafts, rugs or big ticket items and modestly when hailing private taxis. In most other aspects of life prices are fixed. Tipping is generally not expected, but locals will generally round up the bill in taxis and add around 10% in classy restaurants. Porters and bellboys will expect IRR5,000. A discreet gift of a few thousand *tomāns* may help grease the wheels of Iranian society and serve to thank an extraordinarily helpful local.

You won't be able to escape the government-sanctioned dual pricing system that applies to accommodation and some tourist attractions in Iran; foreigners often pay up to five times the price quoted to locals. However thanks to the government's recent commendable efforts to eliminate 'foreigner' prices from many tourist attractions, most notably Persepolis, low food and transport costs make Iran a cheap travel destination.

If you are prepared to stay in the cheapest guesthouses, travel only by bus and eat only at fast food outlets or *kabābi*, you can get by in Iran on a minimum of around IRR500,000 per day. If you want to eat a decent restaurant meal every now and then and stay in mid-range accommodation, a more realistic budget is around IRR1,000,000 (about USD40). If you want to eat and sleep in luxury and fly between major sights, you can easily chew through IRR3,000,000 per day.

Currency

The Iranian rial (ریال in Persian) but symbolised internationally as IRR is the currency of Iran; however prices are often quoted in toman(تومان). One toman is equal to ten rials. USD1 and €1 could get you about 30,000 and 40,000 rials respectively but inflation is extreme due to international economic sanctions.

Coins are issued in values of 50, 100, 250, 500, 1,000, 2,000 and 5,000 rials with banknotes produced in 500, 1,000, 2,000, 5,000, 10,000, 20,000, 50,000 and 100,000. If you remember that a yellow

IRR50,000 note was approximately equal to a euro you wouldn't need to get confused. For large amounts you will see Iran Cheques being used, in IRR500,000 (c. USD15) denominations. They're now used in the same way as cash.

Although Iranians often express amounts of money and prices of goods in "Tomans", however despite the usage of "toman" verbally, amounts of money and prices of goods and services are frequently written in rials.

ATMs in Iran do not accept foreign (non-Iranian) cards except some which accept those from state banks, so bring all the money you might need in cash, preferably in US dollars or euros.

Latest Rial exchange rate in April 2017 is about 3725 Toman for 1 USD, you can check live Rial exchange rate here: <http://www.bonbast.com>

Carrying money

Credit and debit cards are useless in Iran due to US sanctions, so bring enough hard currency for the duration of your stay. US dollars and euros are by far the most useful, though other currencies can at times also be exchanged. Bills in good condition as well as large bills (USD100 and €100 or larger) tend to be preferred, but smaller denominations are also taken. It is advisable to bring small denominations as these may serve to pay hotel bills, taxi fares etc. On arrival at Tehran International Airport, the maximum amount that may be exchanged at night is limited to €50 per person. Rates in exchange offices, the so-called secondary market, are much more favorable than those in banks, and in opposition to the latter the procedure with them is quick and painless. The black, or so-called tertiary market, should be avoided. It may usually be found around exchange offices outside their opening times. Exchange offices can be found in major cities, their opening times are usually Saturday to Thursday from 08:00-16:00.

Trade embargoes mean that banks cannot forward cash advances on your foreign credit cards and they are only accepted by select stores for large purchases, such as Persian rugs. Most will be happy to forward you some cash on your credit card at the same time as your purchase. If you are desperate for cash, you can also try asking these shops to extend you the same favour without buying a rug or souvenir, but expect to pay dearly for the luxury.

Travelers' cheques: Banks do not cash travellers' cheques, so only bring hard cash, preferentially euros or US dollars.

There is a possibility to get a pre-paid no-name gift card from most of banks in Iran if you are concerned with carrying too much cash on you. These cards have no service fee and surcharge and you get exact amount of money you put in card. All ATM and POS terminals support Persian and English languages. Make sure the one you get has ATM Withdrawal Feature. Ask about ATM withdrawal and POS transactions daily limit in advance. Keep your receipts and treat your gift cards like cash as in case of missing them, it is less likely to get replacement even with paperwork. Paperwork may help you to receive new password in case of forgetting it but expect bureaucracy. Cash your left over cards one business day before your departure to avoid any problem caused by

Iranian interbank network SHETAB failure. Some of Persian Gulf Arab countries ATM cards may work in Iranian interbank network but nothing is guaranteed.

Safety in Iran

In general, Iran is one of the safest countries in Middle East. Iran is safer than Westerners might expect. Most people are genuinely friendly and interested to know about you and your country, so leave aside your preconceptions and come with an open mind. Iran is still a relatively low-crime country, although thefts and muggings have been on the increase in recent years. Keep your wits about you, and take the usual precautions against pickpockets in crowded bazaars and buses. Using international credit or debit cards in Iran is not possible everywhere, except Isfahan and Shiraz and some hotels who accept credit cards, but you can buy Iranian banks' prepaid no-name Gift Cards to enjoy money withdrawal from more than 11,000 ATMs around Iran for free. Purchasing gift cards has no surcharge or service fee, and you can withdraw or spend all the money you put in your gift card. Some of the gift cards don't have an ATM withdrawal feature and are only for using in shops and stores POS, so make sure you get ATM enabled gift card before purchasing it from bank. There is a 2,000,000 rials (65USD) daily withdrawal limit for most of Iranian bank cards, so purchasing several card lets you withdraw more money from ATMs per day. Some gift cards usually are not re-loadable. Some are pre-loaded in designated amounts, but some banks let you load them for your desired amount when you purchase. As they are no-name, there is almost no way to report stolen card and get a duplicate. Always keep passwords and cards in a safe place. Having a couple of used empty cards with passwords written on them may help you in case of being mugged for money!! There is no cash-back feature in Iranian POSs, but in case of emergency and having no access to ATM, you may ask a shop owner with POS to give you cash-back. Withdraw your leftover money in cards few days before leaving Iran to avoid any problem which may be caused by SHETAB Interbank Network failure (very very rare). It is common that ATMs do not work for an hour between 12:00AM - 01:00AM for database update. When using ATM be alert. Better not to use it in very quiet areas.

In particular, the tourist centre of Isfahan has had problems with muggings of foreigners in unlicensed taxis, and fake police making random checks of tourists' passports. Only use official taxis, and never allow 'officials' to make impromptu searches when crossing the roads, and even greater care is advised for those driving on them - Iranian drivers tend to overtake along pavements and any section of the road where there is space. In general, watch out for joobs (جوب), the open storm water drains that shoulder every road and are easy to miss when walking in the dark.

Travellers should avoid the southeastern area of Iran, particularly the province of Sistan va Baluchistan. The drug trade thrives based on smuggling heroin from Afghanistan. There is plenty of associated robbery, kidnapping and murder. Some cities, such as Zahedan, Zabol and Mirjaveh are particularly dangerous, although not every place in this region is dangerous. Chahbahar, which is close to the Pakistani border, is a very calm and friendly city. If staying in the capital Tehran, always avoid the southern part of Tehran. Due to high poverty these areas are often dangerous and should not be visited unless necessary. Avoid areas like Javadieh, Shush, Robotkarim and Ambarnaft. Otherwise Tehran is a reasonably safe city.

Iranian perceptions of outsiders

Even though travellers may arrive with the image of a throng chanting "Death to America", this is a superficial media presentation of the Iranian people and your chances of facing anti-Western sentiment as a traveller are slim. Even hardline Iranians make a clear distinction between the Western governments they distrust and individual travellers who visit their country. Americans may receive the odd jibe about their government's policies, but usually nothing more serious than that. However, it is always best to err on the side of caution and avoid politically-oriented conversations, particularly in taxi cabs. In addition, a few Iranian-Americans have been detained recently and accused of espionage, as were three American hikers in 2009 who allegedly strayed across into Iran from Iraqi Kurdistan. These kind of incidents are rare, but still the broader implications are worth considering and bearing in mind. Americans should do well remembering that they are always under surveillance by the Iranian Intelligence service.

Photography

There are a lot of military and other sensitive facilities in Iran. Photography near military and other government installations is strictly prohibited. Any transgression may result in detention and serious criminal charges, including espionage, which can carry the death penalty. Do not photograph any military object, jails, harbors, or telecommunication devices, airports or other objects and facilities which you suspect are military in nature. Be aware that this rule is taken very seriously in Iran.

Women

Female travelers will typically not encounter problems when visiting Iran. Contrary to popular belief, Iranian women typically differ little from those in the West. Women by law must wear a headscarf in public.

Gay and lesbian travel

Same-sex relationships in Iran are not legal and public displays of homosexual affection are not recommended. While public displays of platonic affection (holding hands, draping arms over shoulders, greeting someone with a kiss on the cheek) are very common in Iranian culture between members of the same sex, LGBT foreign should avoid romantic displays of affection. Additionally, some religious Iranians have unfavorable views of same-sex relationships.

Emergencies

Emergency services are extensive in Iran, and response times are very good compared to other local regions.

☎ 110, is the telephone number of the local Police control center, it is probably easiest to phone 110, as the local police have direct contact with other emergency services, and will probably be the only number with English speaking operators.

Other Emergency Services are also available.

☎ 115, for Ambulances

☎ 125, for the Fire and Rescue team (these numbers are frequently answered by the Ambulance or Fire crew operating from them, there is little guarantee these men will speak English).

☎ 112, the international number 112 is available from cell phones, and will usually connect you to the relief and rescue organization (Iranian Red Crescent Society), often use for outside the cities events such as climbers missing.